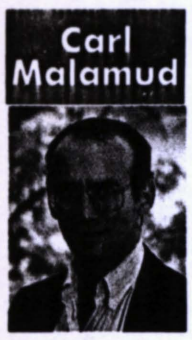
INTEROPERABILITY

The Challenges of Singapore's IT2000 Project

SINGAPORE—Michael Yap has an interesting job. Working for the National Computer Board of Singapore, he is the program manager for a project whose aim is to computerize an entire country.

Singapore has always emphasized the use of information technology (IT). For example, it is a leader in the use of electronic data interchange. One of the more interesting EDI applications is Tradenet, which allows automated clearance of shipments through customs. Medinet allows EDI-based processing of medical claims.



Recently, though, the government decided to raise the ante. IT2000 is a national commitment to set up an infrastructure. The first step was to sit down with industry leaders and try to decide what a national computer-based infrastructure looks like.

People came up with target applications like an intelligent road system, a videotex infrastructure in all homes, massive use of EDI to interact with government and industry, and a variety of other futuristic applications.

The challenge for the National Computer Board and Michael Yap is to turn this into reality. They are definitely serious. Millions of dollars and a large staff are devoted to developing an implementation plan.

What is interesting is the coupling of the vision of IT2000 with ongoing support for current systems. For example, an intelligent road system is a nice goal. In the meantime, though, Singapore has awarded a contract for a smart-card system for cars. If an area gets congested, the government can set a higher toll. The smart card allows any car entering the area to be automatically billed. Dynamic traffic management and no toll booths. Certainly a first step.

The big question for Singapore is whether centralized planning will do the job. If it will work anyplace, this is certainly it. Singapore has a tradition of being run like a benevolent corporation (the financial press refers to it as Singapore Inc.).

The government exerts a very strong influence. By mandating systems, like it did with Tradenet, it exerts a strong push for budding applications. Because government and industry work closely together, mandated systems typically have the support (or at least acceptance) of corporations.

IT2000 has the potential for helping Singapore maintain its position as one of the leading trade centers of Asia. It also has the potential, if improperly done, of hindering progress.

A poor plan is worse than no plan at all.

This is Michael Yap's big challenge. IT2000 is an important project and bears observing. Other countries will not be able to adopt the same model, but pieces of IT2000 can be profitably used in the United States and in Europe, where efforts to install a national infrastructure have often been haphazard and ineffective.

CARL MALAMUD IS WRITING 'EXPLORING THE INTERNET: A TECHNICAL TRAVELOGUE,' A BOOK TO BE PUBLISHED BY PRENTICE HALL, THAT WILL BE FEATURED AS THE INTEROP BOOK AT INTEROP '92 FALL. THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED HERE ARE HIS OWN.

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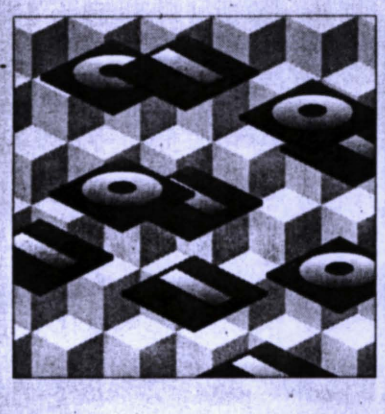

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